

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 158 614

FL 009 730

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 TITLE Sign Language Research and Sociolinguistic Theory.
 PUB DATE Aug 78
 NOTE 20p.; Paper presented at the World Congress of Sociology (9th, Uppsala, Sweden, August 14-19, 1978)

EDRS PRICE MF-\$0.83 HC-\$1.67 Plus Postage.
 DESCRIPTORS Body Language; Communication (Thought Transfer); Communication Skills; Deaf Interpreting; *Deaf Research; *Language Research; Language Role; Language Variation; *Linguistic Theory; Manual Communication; Nonverbal Communication; *Oral Communication Method; *Sign Language; *Sociolinguistics

ABSTRACT

This paper explores the link between sign language research and sociolinguistic theory. It demonstrates how sign language research benefits from a sociolinguistic approach and provides validation for sociolinguistic theory. Previous research on the sign language of the deaf is reviewed, and a distinction is made between "structure-oriented" and "community-oriented" approaches. While the former sees language as an abstract, autonomous system, the latter views it as part of the communication process among human beings. It is argued that the community-oriented approach, which is sociolinguistic in nature, is particularly well suited to sign language research. This is because it avoids pitfalls of the structure-oriented approach, in particular, an orientation toward spoken language and the assumption that sign is homogeneous. It is shown that the usefulness of the community-oriented approach to sign language provides validation for the concepts, methods and scope of sociolinguistics, and thus supports those who argue for a radical change in linguistics along sociolinguistic lines. (Author)

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SIGN LANGUAGE RESEARCH AND SOCIOLINGUISTIC THEORY

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Paper ~~to be~~ given in the Public Session of "The Scope, Goals and Methods of Sociolinguistics", Sociolinguistics Program, Ninth World Congress of Sociology, Uppsala, Sweden, 14-19 August 1978.

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Research in linguistics, as in other social sciences, involves the identification of an area of investigation, and a way of approaching it. Sign language is an area, and sociolinguistics is a possible approach, and both are becoming of increasing interest to linguists. This paper seeks to demonstrate that sign language as an area of linguistic research is particularly well suited to a sociolinguistic approach, and that concepts of sociolinguistic theory receive validation while sign language research advances through their application. After a brief characterization of what constitutes sign language as an area of research, the approaches of previous studies will be outlined. A distinction will be made between 'structure oriented' and 'community oriented' approaches, and their goals and methods will be differentiated. The advantages of the community oriented approach for sign language will be presented. The link between the community oriented approach and sociolinguistic theory will then be explored to show how sociolinguistic concepts find validation in sign language research.

Wherever there are communities of deaf people, communication takes place in a visual manual mode, using what is generally referred to as sign language. Deaf communities usually exist within hearing communities, and although their sign language may be influenced by the spoken language of the surrounding community, it is not based on it or derived from it. Sign is learned by deaf people as a first language, while the spoken language of the community is generally learned as a second language. Sign language is not internationally uniform, contrary to popular belief,

but varies from one geographical community to another. This may be made clear by pointing out that British and American signers are mutually unintelligible systems, even though the spoken language of the surrounding communities is English in both cases.

There are at least two possible ways of viewing language, signed or spoken: (i) as an abstract, autonomous system; and (ii) as part of the communication process among human beings. The first approach will be called 'structure oriented', the second 'community oriented'. The structure oriented approach is traditional in linguistics, and was taken in the first studies of American Sign Language (ASL) in the 1960's and early 1970's. The aim at that time was to establish sign language as within the scope of linguistics, so it is understandable that an approach which was well established in linguistics should have been chosen. The establishment of sign language as a worthy object of investigation also involved countering the popular view that it was primitive and unsystematic: this was a further reason for the orientation towards sign as an abstract system. As in most structure oriented studies of spoken language, data was obtained by elicitation from native signers. The consequence of this approach was that spoken language was taken as the point of departure, and the structure oriented studies of sign language tend to view sign mainly in terms of its similarity to, or difference from spoken language. Those studies which emphasize the similarities represent the earliest trend, when sign was farthest from being accepted as a worthwhile object of linguistic study.

William Stokoe was the main pioneer in establishing sign as within the domain of linguistics. In 1960 he published an article entitled

"Sign Language Structure", where he examined aspects of the phonology and morphology of ASL. He is to be noted especially for his demonstration that ASL has a level comparable to phonology in spoken language, in that signs are made up of simultaneous components which he calls tab, dez and sig. Tab is the place of articulation, dez is the hand configuration, and sig is the movement. These components come from a finite inventory comparable to a list of phonemes for a spoken language. Further arguments for the linguistic status of sign are presented in Stokoe's book published in 1972, where he attempts to dispel myths about sign language and states that "the correct view comes from recognizing that a small closed set of distinctive features of bodily action, having no meaning in themselves, combine to form an open, larger set, the sentences of sign language" (Stokoe, 1972:12).

The trend of establishing parallels between sign and speech is continued, for example, in the work of Kegl and Wilbur (1976), who state as their first assumption that "American Sign Language is composed of discrete elements" (p. 1). They follow Stokoe's phonological analysis, and go on from this to seek parallels to syllables, consonants and vowels. Syllables are seen as made up of two classes of segments as in spoken languages: these are (i) facial expression (analogous to vowels); and (ii) information on the hands (analogous to consonants). Using these units, they explore adjacency conditions, segment structure rules, syllable and morpheme structure constraints, and phonological and morphological rules. They recognize the existence of "visual analogue" in sign, whereby the

movement of some signs can be continuously modified in a way not paralleled in speech, but consider this to be stylistically conditioned and so outside the realm of their analysis. The article is a valuable contribution to the formal description of sign language, but the consonant/hands and vowel/face analogies seem a little forced, and have the effect of emphasizing their assumptions more strongly than their findings.

Although the pioneers in sign language research were quite successful in establishing parallels with spoken language, it was nevertheless clear that the effect of the visual medium on sign language was not to be ignored. Once it had been established that sign was similar enough to spoken language to be considered a language, it became safe to investigate those characteristics which seemed specific to the visual medium.

Bellugi and Fischer (1972) took an experimental approach in investigating the effect of the visual medium on sign, and they compared the speed of articulation in spoken English and ASL. They found that a sign takes longer to produce than a spoken word, but that a proposition takes about the same time in either language. In exploring the grammatical implications of this result, Fischer suggests that sign language has several mechanisms making for economy of expression. She labels these "Doing without", "Incorporation", and "Body movements and facial expression". She shows, for example, how ASL lacks a copula, how verb signs can incorporate location to mark case, and how negation can be accomplished by simultaneous headshaking during the articulation of signs.

In general, she concludes that "There seems to be a premium on economy of expression in sign language" (Bellugi and Fischer, 1972:199).

Friedman is a researcher who has done a considerable amount of work investigating the relation between the medium of sign and its structure. She states that "The study of sign language reveals the effect of the modality of communication on the language system" (Friedman, 1975:959), and she finds this to be especially true in the areas of space, time and person reference. She demonstrates how spatial terms in sign are continuous rather than sequential, and how verbs can incorporate arguments in a way not possible in spoken language.

Investigation of the medium of sign language leads, among other things, to the realization that the hands need not be the only channel used. Baker is an example of a researcher interested primarily in the nonmanual components of sign language. In their joint article, Baker and Padden (1977) point out that

some lexical items are formed by facial movements (not hand movements) and that specific movements of the facial musculature are important in marking negatives, interrogatives and relative clauses (p. 1).

They also distinguish five channels used in ASL: "(1) the hands and arms, (2) the head, (3) the face, (4) the eyes, and (5) the total body orientation or posture" (p. 3). They point out that activities in different channels occur simultaneously, and that there is cross-channel redundancy. They thus show that sign has a different source of redundancy from speech, rather than less redundancy, as some researchers have suggested. Baker and Padden's methodology differs from many structure oriented studies in

that their data is only partly elicited, and is partly obtained from semi-natural conversations.

In all the studies reported so far, regardless of whether the aim was to establish parallels between sign and speech, or to investigate medium-specific differences, it was assumed that sign language could be viewed as a system independently of its use. I see two major flaws in this approach. The first comes from assuming structural equivalence between sign and spoken language, and results in the imposition of certain limitations on the findings of the studies. Spoken language is generally equated with verbal communication in an auditory medium, in contrast to nonverbal communication in a visual medium, and each is often associated with separate functions such as the conveyance of information versus emotions. In sign, however, the boundary between verbal and nonverbal communication cannot be established on the basis of medium, since only the visual medium is available for both. It may not even be possible to distinguish between verbal signed communication and nonverbal communication in structural terms, so that consideration of function, or the uses of sign language, must have priority here.

The second major flaw in the structure oriented approach comes from assuming homogeneity in sign language, and because this assumption is false, the result is a lack of comparability between studies. The assumption of homogeneity has been criticized as an approach to spoken language (cf. Hymes, 1974:78), but is all the more serious in sign language research because (i) most studies have so far been done by non-native signers; and

(ii) sign language clearly involves considerable variation, some varieties being closer to the surrounding spoken language, and some more divergent from it. Native speaker intuitions may be suspect, but at least they are native. Sign language researchers who have based their work on intuitions have mostly had to rely on the intuitions of others; i.e., on elicitation as a method. This has resulted in variable data, with no control for the source of variation. Friedman (1976) points out that when asked to translate written English sentences, signers usually produce sign with an English-like structure, since this is one variety in their repertoire, whereas she finds that textual data "bears no resemblance to English" (p. 128), and so apparently represents another variety. An additional reason that elicitation would tend to produce an English-like variety is that this variety is more prestigious, and is approximated even when attempts are made to elicit the other variety. This is in line with Labov's (1972) "Principle of Subordinate Shift", which he states as follows: "When speakers of a subordinate dialect are asked direct questions about their language, their answers will shift in an irregular manner toward (or away from) the superordinate dialect". The "irregular manner" of the shift is an important point here, since it emphasizes that not only will data elicited by different researchers lack comparability, but even data elicited by the same researcher may lack regularity. The assumption of homogeneity is clearly not justified in sign language research. Attention must be paid to function to account for heterogeneity in a systematic way, and elicitation must be replaced, or at least complemented by, the observation of naturalistic data.

I have outlined two important problems in structure oriented studies of sign: an orientation towards spoken language, and an assumption of homogeneity. These can be avoided in a community oriented approach. Community oriented studies focus on groups of communicating individuals rather than on sign language as an autonomous system. Their emphasis is on discovering how deaf signers communicate using sign language, rather than on the internal structure of sign. They thus pay attention to both function and structure. Methods involve mainly observation rather than elicitation, and use discourse units from interaction as the basis of their analysis rather than the sentence alone. This is a more ethnographic than traditionally linguistic approach, and is taken, for example, by Boese (1968) in his description of communication in a Los Angeles deaf club. Boese uses the concept of "interpretive procedures" developed by Cicourel and defined as "sociological cognitive properties" which are "necessary for the speaker-hearer (or signer) to make sense of his environment as an emergent temporally constituted scene" (Cicourel and Boese, 1972:42). Cicourel (1973) points out the difficulty for a hearing researcher of uncovering the interpretive procedures used by deaf people in his study entitled "Cross-modal communication", where he demonstrates the pitfalls of using an oral language framework to investigate sign language. (See also Cicourel, 1978.)

Nevertheless, through participant observation, Cicourel was able to identify two varieties of sign language in the British deaf community, one closer to English, and one further away from it. I also found these

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varieties in my study of sign language structure and function in a British deaf club (Deuchar, 1978b), where the criteria of diglossia (cf. Ferguson, 1959) were found to be fulfilled. Diglossia refers to the existence of at least two varieties of a language in a speech community, one ('H') being associated with formal, and the other ('L') with informal situations. Diglossia was found to hold for the American signing community by Stokoe (1969), and there is also evidence for diglossia in the Danish (Hansen, 1975), French (Mottez, 1978), Japanese (Tanokami, 1976) and Swedish (Coup d'Oeil, 1977, no. 6:4) signing communities. Diglossia may perhaps be universally found in signing communities within literate hearing communities, and is thus a useful concept for sign language research. It is a useful framework for capturing variation in sign language, and can only be used in community oriented studies since it refers to functional norms shared by the community. These norms are reflected in linguistic structure.

Another type of community oriented study of sign language uses variation theory in attempting to link linguistic and social variables. This approach is represented mainly in Woodward's studies of ASL, where he has shown how social variables such as + deaf, + deaf parents, are related to linguistic variables. (See Woodward, 1973, 1974, 1975.) Woodward incorporates the notion of diglossia in his study except that the notion is modified to allow for a continuum between H and L. He demonstrates how people who are deaf or have deaf parents are more likely to use lects close to H. This fits in with the notion of diglossia in that H represents the functions of the dominant hearing, and L of the

deaf community. A weakness of Woodward's study is that it does not reflect the functional allocation of H and L. This is because his data are based on questioning informants as to whether or not they use a particular variant, without reference to stylistic or functional constraints. Such a study could be improved by observation of signing in natural settings, ideally by a native signer.

Yet another approach which can be subsumed under the ethnographic, or community oriented approach, involves the analysis of interaction at the micro level. The data for such studies have generally been collected by eliciting conversations. Stokoe (1975) asked an informant to relate summer plans, first as if to a deaf friend, and secondly to someone in the role of hearing teacher or counselor. The resulting two samples of discourse showed considerable difference in spatial organization, and corresponded in structure to the diglossic varieties H and L, thus exemplifying the notion of diglossia at the micro, interactional level. Baker (1977) studied turn-taking in ASL by eliciting dyadic conversations. This enabled her to identify regulators of turn-taking, especially eye gaze, which is more important than in speech. A study such as this avoids the pitfalls of elicitation, and shows that signers have knowledge of interactional rules as well as of the structure of sign language, which enable them to communicate effectively. As Baker points out, it also has implications for improving deaf/hearing interaction by learning how we can "cross the sociolinguistic boundaries separating hearing culture from deaf culture" (p. 232).

The methods and goals of the community oriented approach to sign language research are summed up by Stokoe (1978:373) in the following statement:

If the researcher considers the social nature of language as well as its linguistic nature, data will be sought in real rather than in contrived situations and due attention paid to the function of sign language as well as its structure.

This emphasis on function as well as structure, and on language in use rather than viewed abstractly, is clearly a sociolinguistic approach. An approach of this kind seems particularly well suited to sign language research. As has been shown, a sociolinguistic approach focuses on communicating individuals rather than on language as an autonomous system, and so avoids oral and structural preconceptions of what language is. This is particularly important when dealing with language in a visual medium. In addition, a sociolinguistic approach can account for variation. This is a salient characteristic of sign language communities, since they generally exhibit diglossia, an extreme case of language variation. The advantages of a sociolinguistic approach hold for spoken languages also, but sign language data makes such an approach almost imperative.

Sign language research can thus provide an additional impetus for those sociolinguists who argue that the domain of linguistics should be broadened. Yngve (1975) proposes a "broad linguistics" which would aim "to achieve a scientific understanding of how people communicate (p. 544). This would involve taking the communicating individual as the unit of analysis rather than the abstract system known as language. It would

thus deal with "the full range of communicative phenomena" rather than just spoken language. Labov would also advocate a broader approach. He finds sociolinguistics an "oddly redundant term" (Labov, 1971:152), since he feels that linguistics should always take social factors into account. Hymes (1974:172) conceives of linguistics as "sociolinguistic in nature", and says that "Sociolinguistics itself must be a mode of description" (p. 174) rather than merely involving the addition of contextual or stylistic considerations to previously existing grammars. He echoes Labov's orientation when he says:

The final goal of sociolinguistics, I think, must be to preside over its own liquidation. The flourishing of a hybrid term such as sociolinguistics reflects a gap in the disposition of established disciplines with respect to reality (p. 206).

Labov and Hymes thus both feel that the current approach in linguistics should be not merely extended, but replaced by a sociolinguistic approach.

So I am suggesting, not that sociolinguistic theory should be applied only to sign language, while linguistics as presently conceived continues to deal with spoken language, but rather that the phenomenon of sign language provides extra ammunition for those who argue for a radical change in linguistics along sociolinguistic lines. Having shown that a sociolinguistic approach is the best one for dealing with sign language from a linguistic point of view, I will now show more specifically how sign language studies validate the concepts, methods and scope of sociolinguistics.

A fundamental concept in sociolinguistics is heterogeneity, and hence the importance of accounting for variation in language. As has

been shown, sign language shows considerable variation, and this can be conceived of in terms of diglossia, another important sociolinguistic concept. Diglossia involves priority of function over structure in linguistic descriptions, and its use in studies of signing as well as speech communities validates Hymes' view of function as "prior to and warranting structure" (Hymes, 1974:9). Concern with function in language entails attention to its use in communication, including interaction. The value of analysing interactional data on sign language has been outlined above. Analysis of interaction involves dealing with discourse, i.e. units larger than the sentence. This has been found essential for capturing sign language grammar in both ASL and British Sign Language (cf. Friedman, 1976; Deuchar, 1978a).

Concern with variation, function, interaction and discourse in sign language research make observation the most important method of collecting data. Labov (1972) suggests that observation increases the chances of validity when compared to elicitations and intuitions, and that "Observations of the vernacular provide the most systematic basis for linguistic theory" (p. 97). As has been pointed out, elicitation and intuitions are particularly suspect in sign language research, because of the principle of subordinate shift already mentioned, and the paucity of native signers conducting sign language research up till now.

Finally, sign language research provides validation for aspects of the scope of sociolinguistics, in particular its concern with theoretical and practical relevance. By concern with theoretical relevance I mean

relevance to other academic disciplines. The term 'sociolinguistics' already suggests an interdisciplinary approach. Communication is an area of interest in sociology, psychology and anthropology also. Sociolinguists have a definite advantage to be gained from making their contributions relevant to those other disciplines, so that they can reach a wider audience and participate in building an integrated theory of human communication. This interdisciplinary approach receives validation in sign language research in that the communication of deaf people has always been a concern of several disciplines interested in the nature and consequences of deafness as a handicap. Stokoe (1978:376-377) states that:

the future of sign language research will depend on how soon the physical and the social, the biological, and the cultural sciences can evolve a unified theory of man,

The role of sociolinguistics seems to have a promising role to play in such a unified theory, for, as Hymes says:

It is a sociolinguistic perspective that naturally and inevitably considers mankind, not only as what it has been, and is, but also as what it is becoming (Hymes, 1974:209).

While concern with the theoretical relevance of sociolinguistics involves promoting its links with other disciplines, concern with its practical relevance entails extending its scope to aid in the solution of certain social problems. These may include, for example, problems of the status of linguistic minorities, of the role of language in education, and of language planning and language treatment. All these problems are found in the deaf community. The deaf are clearly a

linguistic minority, whose language has low status in the hearing world; the role of sign language in education is a burning issue; and attempts at sign language treatment are currently being made by its promoters in the U.S. and Europe. The solution of such problems could be advanced by sociolinguistic studies which provide information about the function and structure of sign language in deaf communities.

To conclude, discussion of the distinction between structure oriented and community oriented studies of sign language has shown that a community oriented, sociolinguistic approach is the most fruitful. Sociolinguistic theory thus provides an appropriate framework for sign language research, and the findings of such research reinforce the validity of the sociolinguistic approach.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This work was supported by a grant from the Mabelle McLeod Lewis Memorial Fund. I should like to thank the following people for their comments on an earlier draft of the paper: B. Lavandera, M. Martin-Jones, G. Sankoff, E. Traugott and S. Veach.

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